

HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MINUTES of the meeting of the OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) held in CIVIC SUITE 0.1A, PATHFINDER HOUSE, ST MARY'S STREET, HUNTINGDON PE29 3TN on Thursday, 3 April 2014.

- PRESENT: Councillor T V Rogers – Chairman.
- Councillors G J Bull, E R Butler, S Greenall, R Harrison, P G Mitchell and M F Shellens.
- APOLOGIES: Apologies for absence from the meeting were submitted on behalf of Councillors P L E Bucknell, S Cawley, K J Churchill and A H Williams.
- IN ATTENDANCE: Executive Councillors J D Ablewhite (item 101), B S Chapman (items 101 and 102) and J A Gray (items 103 and 104)
- Councillors Mrs B E Boddington and J W Davies.

98. MR TOM CALCOTT

The Chairman reported on the recent death of Mr Tom Calcott who had been employed as a caretaker by the Council. Having expressed their appreciation of the work Mr Calcott had undertaken during his employment with the Authority and their condolences to his family, the Panel observed a Minute's silence as a mark of respect.

99. MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Panel held on 6th March 2014 were approved as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

100. MEMBERS' INTERESTS

No declarations were received.

101. NOTICE OF KEY EXECUTIVE DECISIONS

The Panel considered and noted the current Notice of Key Executive Decisions (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book). Members were informed that the Cabinet at its meeting on 10th April 2014 would consider the Corporate Plan.

In response to an interest expressed by Councillor P G Mitchell in the forthcoming 'Cambridgeshire Long-Term Transport Strategy', Members were informed that the Environmental Well-Being Panel would discuss this in due course, at which time Councillor Mitchell would be welcome to attend.

102. MEMBERS IT

(Councillor B S Chapman, Executive Councillor for Customer Services, was in attendance for this item).

The Panel received a presentation from the IMD Service Manager on proposed changes to IT provision for elected Members. As part of the presentation, the Panel was advised of current issues surrounding Members IT and that the Council intended to cease providing them with IT equipment and to promote alternative ways of working. Details of the benefits to elected Members, the risks associated with the proposal and the next steps pending approval by the Cabinet were provided. A demonstration then took place of the use of an iPad to access and annotate committee papers.

The Executive Councillor for Customer Services informed Members that withdrawing Council funded equipment would achieve savings in the region of £50k and that there would be further savings through a reduction in printing of paper reports. He explained that the Wi-Fi capabilities within Pathfinder House had been substantially improved and reported on the positive experience of Members at South Cambridgeshire District Council in moving to this type of approach. He also referred to the 'ease of use' benefits to elected Members in being able to use up-to-date technology and connectivity.

A Member queried whether it would be essential for all Councillors to purchase an iPad or would other similar devices suffice. In response the IMD Service Manager explained that the iPad was recommended because it was more secure; however Members would be able to use their own Android-based tablets if they wished to do so. Reasonable levels of support would be provided for these.

The Panel considered a range of issues relating to the Modern.gov application for accessing and annotating committee papers. Members were informed that it would function on Android and Apple devices and operated on Windows 8. In terms of the practical arrangements associated with using tablets in place of printed Agendas and reports, Members queried whether there would be sufficient memory to access large agendas such as those for the Development Management Panel, whether there was an indexing facility and whether downloading large documents at home might cause them to exceed their personal data limits, which would result in additional costs. In response, the IMD Service Manager agreed to undertake further testing of file sizes. Members also commented on the need to stress test the Wi-Fi facility within the Civic Suite and were assured that Officers would monitor Wi-Fi usage and increase capacity if required.

Having noted that Members would have to provide their own email addresses for Council business, the Panel was advised of the proposed security and encryption arrangements for sending confidential emails and documents to these addresses. Further research and investigation was required. Additional work would also be needed to enable Members to receive confidential committee papers and reports through the Modern.Gov committee management system.

The Panel then discussed the assistance the Council might provide to enable Members to purchase a device. The option of paying through Members allowances over their term of office was being considered. Members discussed how this scheme would work, particularly if it commenced part way through a term of office. The Accountancy Manager explained that it would not be possible to offer an interest free loan as this would constitute a 'benefit in kind' and that options which were similar to a 'Salary Sacrifice' had already been investigated and discounted. Having noted that only limited discounts would be achieved if the Council were to purchase devices on behalf of individuals, it was suggested that Members would need to make their own decisions based upon their tax position. Those Members wishing to purchase a device that had a higher specification than required by the Council's systems would need to 'top up' any loan that was provided.

The Panel discussed whether the requirement for Members to purchase IT equipment could act as a deterrent to candidates who were considering standing for election to the District Council. As the basic allowance was currently in the region of £4k, the Panel was of view that it would be reasonable to expect Members to purchase their own equipment at a cost of approximately £400 over their term of office. However, it was suggested that candidates should be made aware of the IT requirements for elected Members and the potential availability of a loan from the Council to enable them to purchase their own equipment.

Members discussed whether the proposed transition arrangements were realistic and emphasised the need for appropriate training and support to be in place for Members before the proposed change in arrangements was implemented. They were of the opinion that further consideration needed to be given to the details of the new arrangements, specifically the mechanisms for accessing Council information such as that contained in the address book from Members own equipment. Some Members were of the view that MS-Office should be provided by the Council.

Concern was expressed that Members might incur increased costs for paper and toner when printing documents at home. In response, it was explained that there would be flexibility in the arrangements so, for example, printed copies of large Development Management Panel Agenda could still be produced. Having expressed support in principle for the proposals, it was

RESOLVED

that the Panel's comments be conveyed to the Cabinet for consideration as part of their deliberations on this matter.

103. NATIONAL NON DOMESTIC RATING - CHANGES TO DISCRETIONARY RATE RELIEF POLICY FROM 1 APRIL 2014

(Councillor B S Chapman, Executive Councillor for Customer Services, was in attendance for this item).

With the assistance of a report by the Head of Customer Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel considered

proposals to amend the Council's existing Discretionary Relief Policy to incorporate the new temporary reliefs that were announced in the Chancellor's 2013 Autumn Statement and to address issues relating to the recent flooding in some areas of the Country. Having been advised of details of the proposed discounts and that it was intended that the cost of any relief awarded would be fully reimbursed by the Government, the Executive Councillor for Customer Services emphasised that the introduction of temporary reliefs would support the Council's strategic aim to support the local economy and local businesses.

In considering the contents of the report, the Panel discussed the arrangements through which the Government intended to reimburse local authorities and whether the Council was confident that it would do so. Whilst the additional administrative and cost burden to the Council was not yet known, the Panel was informed that it was expected the additional work could be undertaken from within existing resources. It was then reported that the Council had received no requests for flood relief to-date in Huntingdonshire. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that, providing that the cost of any relief awards are fully reimbursed by the Government and subject to the satisfaction of all qualifying conditions, the Cabinet be recommended to approve the award of (Section 47) Discretionary Rate Relief to provide –

- (a) a discount of £1000 (subject to state aid limits) for all occupied retail properties with a rateable value not exceeding £50,000
- (b) a 50% business rate relief for 18 months for businesses that move into retail premises that have been empty for a year or more; and
- (c) a 100% rate relief for 3 months for any day between 1 December 2013 and 31 March 2014 where non domestic properties have been flooded and meet the qualifying criteria.

104. INTERNAL AUDIT REVIEW - ELECTRONIC DOCUMENT MANAGEMENT

(Councillor J A Gray, Executive Councillor for Resources, was in attendance for this item).

With the assistance of a report by the Internal Audit and Risk Manager (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) the Panel reviewed the outcome of the Internal Audit of the management of the Electronic Document Management (EDM) system within six of the Council's services. Members were advised that the Audit had concluded that the systems in place to manage EDM had been considered 'adequate' and their attention was drawn to the actions that had since been implemented.

Having noted that it had originally been intended that the Audit would constitute a post implementation review of the EDM project but that this had not been possible owing to a lack of material, Members discussed in general terms the need for Council schemes and projects to be subject to a process of independent post implementation review. The Council recently had spent significant sums of money on projects, including the installation of solar panels at Eastfield House, the launch of a new One Leisure website, development at One Leisure St Ives and the construction of the Huntingdon multi-storey car park and Members were of the opinion that it was essential for the Council to establish that it had realised benefits from its investment and had secured value for money.

In terms of the business plans that had been prepared to support the development of the multi-storey car park and the One Leisure St Ives development, a Member questioned what the positions were compared with the forecast projections. As these projects had only been operational for a short time, this information could not yet be provided. Members asked to be kept informed of progress.

Having noted that a Corporate Programme and Project Management Board had been established to promote project management disciplines and governance within the Authority, the Panel discussed the role of Members in this area and the respective responsibilities of the Overview and Scrutiny and the Corporate Governance Panels. It was explained that the Board would report to the Corporate Governance Panel through the Annual Assurance Statement. Members supported the intention to strengthen the Council's approach to project management, including the way business cases for schemes were developed, managed and reviewed following implementation. It was suggested that as part of the new arrangements, the Panel should receive follow-up reviews once projects had been completed.

In terms of the actions arising from the Audit, Members commented on the potential savings that could be achieved if parishes were not given printed information that was freely available on the planning portal. However, some of the smaller parishes would not be equipped to download large documents and should be given special consideration. Whereupon, it was

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

105. FACING THE FUTURE

(Councillor J A Gray, Executive Councillor for Resources, was in attendance for this item).

To enable the Panel to commence its role monitoring the progress of the Facing the Future process and its impact on the Council, an update was received on the work that had been undertaken to implement the 'Limited Service Impact' savings. A copy of the report by the Assistant Director (Finance and Resources) is appended in the Minute Book.

The Executive Councillor for Resources stated that the Cabinet remained committed to the Facing the Future process. Members were informed that those savings that were being taken forward immediately had been incorporated into the budget for 2014/15. This amounted to £378k in 2014/15, rising to £497k in 2015/16.

In response to a question regarding the role of Overview and Scrutiny in monitoring the progress of the overall project and reviewing individual savings opportunities, it was reported that monitoring reports would be submitted to Members on a regular basis as part of the Council's budget management cycle. There would also be the opportunity to review individual savings proposals as they emerged at a later date.

In terms of the delivery of the remaining suggestions, Members were informed that a Corporate Programme and Project Management Board had been established to oversee their delivery and a project plan was currently being developed for this purpose.

RESOLVED

that the contents of the report be noted.

106. WORKPLAN STUDIES

The Panel received and noted a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) containing details of studies that were being undertaken by the Overview and Scrutiny Panels for Social and Environmental Well-Being. The Chairman provided an update on the review of the operation of the Overview and Scrutiny Panels that was being undertaken by the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen.

Members were also informed that at a meeting held on the previous evening, the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen had received an update on the development of the Council's new Corporate Plan, together with the initial thoughts of the Executive Leader on the structure of the Cabinet and Portfolios for the 2014/15 Municipal year.

107. OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY (ECONOMIC WELL-BEING) - PROGRESS

The Panel received and noted a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book) reviewing progress on matters that had been previously discussed. In so doing, Members received an update on the activities of the Working Group that had been established to review the Authority's gross expenditure. Councillor E R Butler also provided an update on the work of the Council's Fraud Team and on the introduction of the Single Fraud Investigation Service, which would go live from April 2016.

The Chairman reported that, in accordance with the Access to Information procedure rules, his permission had been sought for the Strategic Economic Plan prepared by the Greater Cambridge Greater Peterborough Enterprise Partnership (LEP) to be considered by the Cabinet at its meeting on 10th April 2014. Members were advised

that, in recognition of the Council's responsibility to scrutinise the partnerships in which it was involved, the Chairman and the Chief Executive of the Partnership had been invited to a future meeting to give a presentation on its Business Plan.

In response to the Chairman's previous request that the Panel should receive the quarterly Capital and Revenue monitoring reports that were prepared for the Cabinet, Members noted that a reporting procedure had now been agreed and the next report would be available for the Panel's meeting in July 2014.

108. SCRUTINY

The Panel considered and noted the latest edition of the Decision Digest (a copy of which is appended in the Minute Book).

At the conclusion of the proceedings and having regard to the fact that this was the last scheduled meeting of the Municipal Year, the Chairman took the opportunity to thank Councillor A H Williams for his work on the Panel. Councillor Williams had decided not to stand for re-election.

Members then expressed their appreciation of the Chairman, who had also decided not to stand for re-election. They extended their best wishes to him for the future and paid tribute to his work and the non-political manner in which he had operated.

Chairman